

CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

however, whose business it was to carry out the orders of his superiors to the best of his ability, and his ability was certainly of a high order. His personality, plain, simple and honest—so much so that his soldiers called him “Old Rough and Ready”—was attractive to the people. His victories exalted him to the status of a national hero and people began to talk of him for the Presidency. This was sufficiently disquieting to Polk and his friends at Washington, although Taylor attended strictly to his business and did not meddle with politics.

CHAPTER XI

THE MEXICAN WAR—GENERAL SCOTT

CHAPTER XI

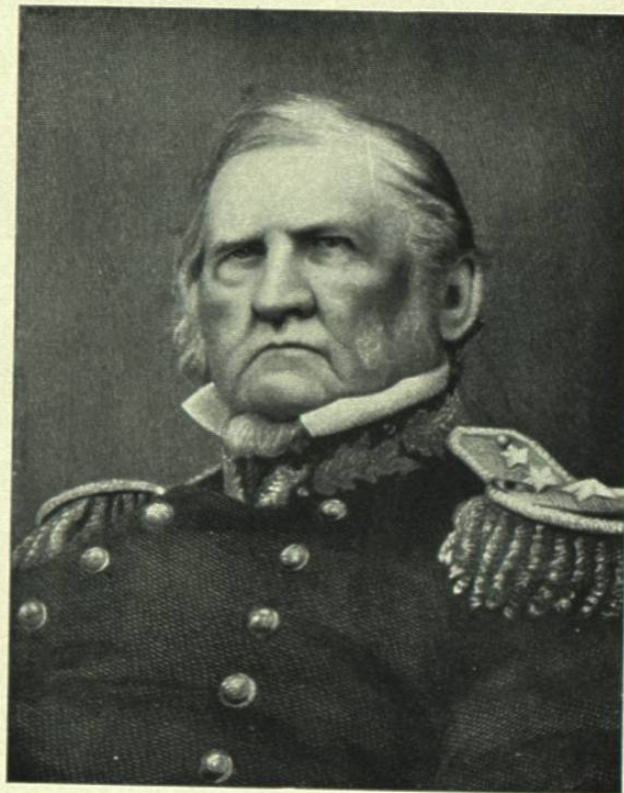
THE MEXICAN WAR—GENERAL SCOTT

It was evident to every military man that the proper way to effect the conquest of Mexico was, not to attempt to seize the capital by marching down from the Rio Grande; the most practicable access to the interior was along the line from Vera Cruz to the City of Mexico. The advance on this line might be more fiercely contested, but the line was much shorter, and, in spite of the mountains, the way much more practicable. The war would be sooner ended, and, as nobody doubted the final issue, time was a very important factor.

The ranking officer of the United States Army was then Major-General Winfield Scott, who had won great distinction in the War of 1812, and was an accomplished soldier of international reputation. Unfortunately, for

CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

the administration, he, too, was a Whig. He was also a much greater personage, much more of a politician, and man of affairs generally, than Taylor. When Taylor had become so prominent, the administration resolved to bring forward Scott in the hope of dividing the allegiance of the Whigs between these two military commanders, so that neither would become sufficiently formidable as a Presidential candidate to cause disquiet to Polk at the next election. If they had had a general of their own political faith, with sufficient skill and capacity to be trusted with the conduct of the war, both Taylor and Scott would have been set aside. Indeed, after he had sent him to Mexico, Polk tried to supersede Scott by appointing Thomas H. Benton, a lieutenant-general, and when Congress refused to permit this, the President asked for authority to place a junior over a senior, intending to appoint Benton a major-general and place him over Scott. This request was also refused. So Scott was perforce left in command. The



GENERAL WINFIELD SCOTT.

GENERAL SCOTT

administration did everything possible to embarrass him, However, his division commanders were all Democrats and were not in sympathy with him.

To make an army for Scott, Taylor's veteran regular troops were taken away from him, raising Scott's total force to about twelve thousand men. With these he was ordered to begin a campaign toward the City of Mexico via Vera Cruz. Scott received just about one-half the force he had deemed necessary for the task. Nevertheless, he went about it with zeal and courage, determined to do his best.

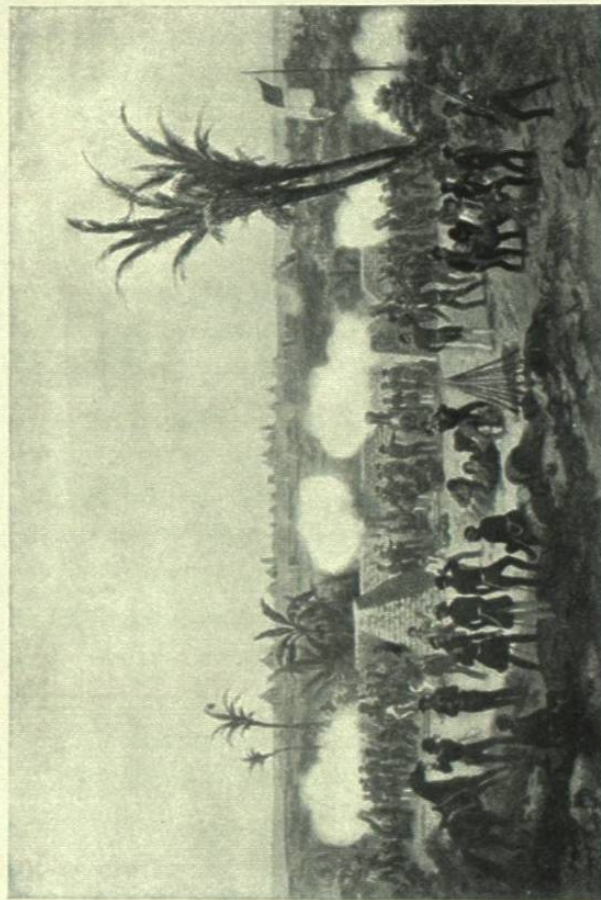
The naval force on the Gulf of Mexico had been commanded by Commodore David Connor, an officer of respectable attainments but nothing more. He had cooperated, so far as he could, with Taylor, but had effected little or nothing, considering the force at his disposal and the fact that Mexico had no navy. He was a prime seaman, however, if not a great captain. He disembarked Scott's army

CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

at Vera Cruz in a masterly way, without loss, on the 9th of March, 1847. The Mexicans, confident in the strength of the city, made no effort to prevent the landing of the Americans.

The siege of Vera Cruz was immediately begun, and after enduring a furious bombardment for four days, the city capitulated on the 26th of March, 1847. The American loss was only sixty-seven wounded, the Mexicans lost one thousand in killed and wounded.

Connor, whose term of sea duty in the Gulf had expired, was superseded by Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry. Under his energetic and efficient direction, the navy made a vigorous campaign up and down the coast, taking every port on the shore, and others on the rivers which the sailors could reach. Scott with ten thousand men, a large part of them being from the regular army, and a moiety of these veterans who had been trained and disciplined by Taylor, started across the mountains for the City of Mexico. To invade a country of the size of Mexico with such a force,



THE BOMBARDMENT OF VERA CRUZ.
From the original by Nebel.

GENERAL SCOTT

was an act of boldness and daring which stands almost alone in our history. Nor was this enterprise "a mere military promenade" as it has been sometimes sneeringly called. There was the hardest kind of fighting in this campaign, even if the Americans did win every battle.

The Mexicans on their part had not been idle after the fall of Monterey. With the mistaken idea that Santa Anna would prove a friend to the United States, the government had sent a warship to bring him from Havana, to which place he had been exiled in a recent revolution, and had landed him at Vera Cruz. Whatever he was, or had been, Santa Anna chose the patriotic part on this occasion. He immediately declared for his country and against the United States. He was able to get himself elected President and then assumed command of the Mexican forces, which he concentrated at San Luis Potosi, midway between Monterey and Vera Cruz.

Although Taylor's army had been depleted

CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

by the withdrawal of the bulk of his regulars, he still was in command of some five thousand men. Scott had recommended him to fall back to the Rio Grande, but it was not in Taylor's nature either to retreat or to remain quietly where he was, doing nothing. He, therefore, led his men southward, captured Saltillo, and advanced through the mountains with his army, threatening the south. Santa Anna thought he saw a chance to crush him. Scott would soon arrive before Vera Cruz and thereafter he knew he would have to deal with Scott's army. San Luis Potosi was admirably situated to cover both points now threatened. Santa Anna, who showed many of the qualities of a general, determined to rush a large army to the north and overwhelm Taylor. He thought he would be able to do this and still get back to the south in time to confront Scott.

With imperious energy, he organized an army of twenty thousand men, including about five thousand cavalry, and by a forced march of about five hundred miles appeared before

GENERAL SCOTT

General Taylor on the 22nd of February, 1847. Taylor had received notice of Santa Anna's advance and had retired to a famous defile in the mountains, the pass of Angostura, a mile south of the large hacienda of Buena Vista and about six miles south of Saltillo. Deducting the garrison of Saltillo, Taylor had about forty-seven hundred men with which to hold the pass. Ninety per cent of these men were volunteers who had never been in action.

There was some heavy skirmishing on the 22nd, the advantage being with Santa Anna, but nothing decisive had been attempted. That night General Taylor, after making the rounds of his lines, rode back to Buena Vista and Saltillo to bring up every available man to the fighting line for the morrow's battle, and to satisfy himself that everything was right with his base of supplies, which was threatened by a large detachment of Santa Anna's cavalry.

The battle ground of Buena Vista lies between two ranges of mountains. Near the east

CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

range is a narrow pass. Extending from this pass to the west is a plateau about a mile wide, which is broken by tremendous ravines terminating on the slope of the mountains.

At 2 A. M. on the 23rd, Santa Anna put his army in motion. At dawn the battle began. The fighting line was under the immediate command of General John E. Wool, a veteran and approved soldier. With his batteries, supported by some infantry and cavalry, engaging the right of the line which held the narrow part of the pass, Santa Anna concentrated the bulk of his army on the American left.

The conflict on the extreme left was desperate. Conditions on the right and front were menacing and Wool did not dare detach any of his men to succor the left. The line, in truth, was much too long for the small American force to hold against such overwhelming superiority as the Mexicans enjoyed. The Mexicans avoided the ravines by advancing along the slopes of the mountains and turned the American left. Finally an Indiana regi-



THE BATTLE OF BUENA VISTA.
From the original by Nebel.

GENERAL SCOTT

ment was seized with panic and fled, and, despite the efforts of other troops, the line was gradually forced back by the overwhelming onslaught, most of the soldiers fighting desperately and contesting every foot of the ground.

General Taylor, leading Colonel Jefferson Davis' fine regiment of Mississippi riflemen, came on the field early in the morning. Wool, who had been fighting heroically, remarked to his commander that the army was whipped. "That," said Taylor calmly, "will be for me to determine." He checked the advance of the enemy by throwing Davis' riflemen against them, thus giving the left wing of his army time to halt and reform. These Mississippians were brilliantly led, and fought with the greatest courage. The lines were reformed, guns were brought up, and a furious battle raged all over the plateau and through the ravines until evening.

The Mexicans tried again and again to crush the American left. At the same time

CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

determined assaults were made on the right and center; but everywhere they were repulsed with terrible slaughter. As usual, the deciding factor in the battle was the American artillery, which was managed and served with a skill, rapidity and brilliancy worthy of the highest praise. Sometimes, without support from the infantry, the artillery checked the Mexican rushes. The carnage among the Mexicans was fearful. The casualties among the Americans were also very severe. Completely baffled in his purpose by the heroic constancy of Taylor and his men, Santa Anna at last withdrew from the field, acknowledging a bitter defeat.

I regard Buena Vista as one of the decisive battles of the war, and perhaps the decisive one, for if Santa Anna had overwhelmed Taylor, as one time he was so near doing, he would have led back to attack Scott an army flushed with victory and Scott would have required a vastly larger force than he had at his disposal to carry out his brilliant campaign. What-

GENERAL SCOTT

ever Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma had been, Buena Vista was a real battle and a splendid victory. Ultimately it made General Taylor President of the United States. The American loss was seven hundred and forty-six, the Mexican over two thousand.¹

Defeated, but not dismayed, with an energy for which he deserves great credit, Santa Anna led his shattered army back a thousand miles to confront Scott after the fall of Vera Cruz. By making use of every resource, including his private means, he reorganized the army and with fifteen thousand men, took a strong position in the mountains of Orizaba at the pass of Cerro Gordo. There, on the 18th of April, Scott attacked him with eight thousand men. Santa Anna had neglected to fortify a commanding height, never dreaming that the Americans could scale its crest. Scott, whose engineering corps² was remarkable for its

¹ It was in this battle that Taylor sent his famous despatch to one of his batteries, "A little more grape, Captain Bragg."

² Robert E. Lee, Pierre G. T. Beauregard, Henry W. Halleck,

CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

efficiency, was apprised of the situation, the height was seized, the Mexican lines were taken at a disadvantage, and by a general charge on flank and in front, the pass was taken by storm. Santa Anna fled so precipitately that he left behind him his wooden leg.¹ The American loss was sixty-three killed and three hundred and ninety-eight wounded; the Mexican, twelve hundred killed and wounded and three thousand captured.

After the battle Scott seized the city of Jalapa and the great fortress of Perote without any resistance to speak of; and then, following the route made famous by Cortez over three hundred years before, he led his army over the mountains and occupied the important city of Puebla. There, having received reinforcements which enabled him to repair the loss made by sickness and casualties of battle,

George B. McClellan, Joseph E. Johnston and George G. Meade were among his engineer officers.

¹ This is perhaps the principal fact that the average person recalls about the Mexican War! It is interesting, of course, but it had no bearing on the determination of the issue.



THE BATTLE OF CERRO GORDO.
From the original painting by Chappel.

GENERAL SCOTT

with some ten thousand men of all arms of the service, he began his famous campaign against the City of Mexico on the 7th of August.

He approached the Mexican capital from the southward. On the 20th of August, in a series of brilliant engagements among the lava beds—El Pedregal—or Padierna, or Contre-ras, and at the village of Churubusco on the same day, he overwhelmed the Mexicans under General Victoria in the first battle and under Santa Anna himself in the second. The American loss on that day of hot but brilliant fighting, was ten hundred and fifteen; the Mexican, five thousand eight hundred and seventy-seven.

After the battle of Churubusco, Scott advanced to within sight of the capital, there halted his army, proposed an armistice, and sent forward Mr. Nicholas B. Trist, Commissioner from the United States to Mexico, who had accompanied the army, offering Mexico a treaty of peace.

This was an act of great magnanimity on

CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

the part of the American captain, which should be noted. Scott could have taken possession of the capital then and there without much difficulty, but he gave an opportunity to Mr. Trist to tender proposals for peace without subjecting Mexico to that humiliation. The Mexicans, however, inspired by Santa Anna, were not at all certain that the war had been ended, and, convinced that the opportunity for defeating Scott was still open, after delaying matters with Mr. Trist—whose demands they regarded as impossible—until they could further reorganize their forces, they practically terminated negotiations by a counter ultimatum. These propositions are discussed in the succeeding chapter, so as not to break the thread of the narrative of military movements.

Scott was prompt to take up the challenge. On the 7th of September he officially terminated the armistice, the Mexicans having given abundant excuse. The strongest outpost of the fortifications of the capital was a castle upon the famous rock of Chapultepec. The

GENERAL SCOTT

base of this rock was defended by forts and works, the key to which was an old stone mill called Molino del Rey. This mill was captured after a furious battle on the morning of September 8th, by troops under the immediate command of General Worth, upon whom Scott had imposed the congenial duty. Worth put thirty-one hundred men in action against fourteen thousand Mexicans, not all of whom were actively engaged. The American loss was proportionately heavier than in any battle of the war, being seven hundred and ninety-nine, or nearly twenty-six per cent. The Mexican loss was over three thousand. The fighting had been the fiercest kind of a hand-to-hand struggle.

Chapultepec was bombarded for two days and then stormed with great gallantry on the 13th of September by the divisions of Pillow, Twiggs and Quitman. The Mexicans had fought bravely in every battle—there can be no mistake about that. The country was torn by dissensions and the proper efficiency of the

CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

army hindered by divided councils and conflicting purposes; moreover, the men were ill-paid, worse equipped, badly drilled, raw and undisciplined, and ignorantly officered. But whenever there was actual fighting, they fought bravely and well. Sometimes they piled the ground with American slain. General Grant has borne testimony to their courage in many instances. Chapultepec was especially remarkable for the valiant resistance of the Mexicans. On the top of the rock was located the Mexican Military Academy and the youths undergoing training at that institution proved their right to the title of soldiers by the heroism of their defense.

Scott did not lose a moment after the storming of the castle. The same day he launched his columns at the City of Mexico. The ground around that ancient city was marshy, and the walls were approached by long, broad and well-paved causeways. Some of these causeways carried stone aqueducts on arches down the middle. There was fierce hand-to-



THE STORMING OF CHAPULTEPEC.

From the original painting by Powell.

GENERAL SCOTT

hand fighting from arch to arch, but finally the columns of Worth and Quitman stormed the San Cosme and Belem gates and Scott effected a lodgment in the city that night. The Mexicans fled the city, and Scott and his army marched in the next day. This time the war really was over.

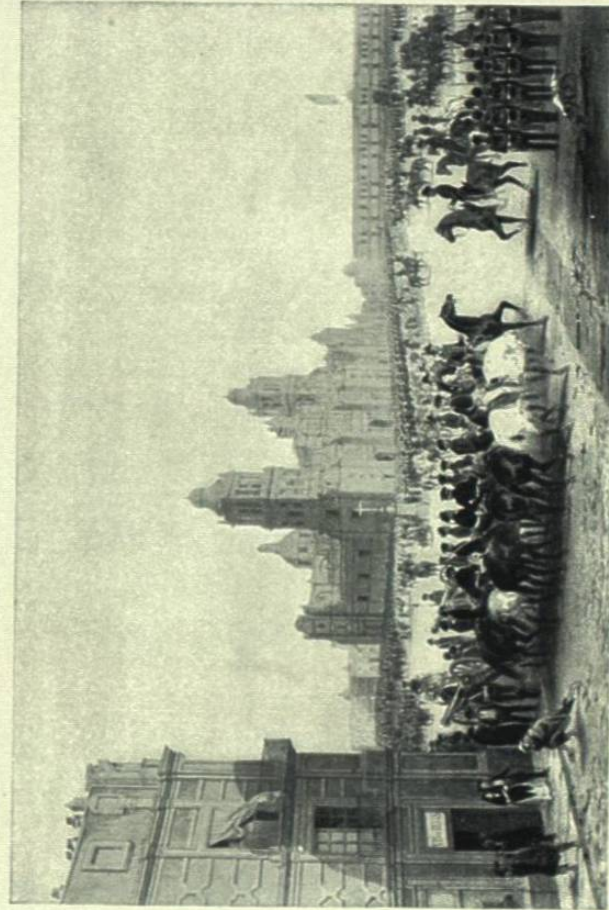
Scott, at Chapultepec and the attack on the city gates, had eight thousand men in action, of whom he lost eight hundred and sixty-two; the Mexican force was twenty-five thousand, not all of them being actively engaged. This army was defeated, demoralized and scattered in retreat; in killed, wounded, captured and missing, it is estimated that Santa Anna lost over ten thousand men in that day's fighting, most of the loss being in captured and missing. "Both the strategy and tactics displayed by General Scott in these various engagements were faultless," was the testimony of Ulysses S. Grant, then a second lieutenant of infantry in Scott's army.¹

¹ Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant.

CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST

The other military operations may be briefly summarized. The navy held the east coast of Mexico. On the west coast of California squadrons under Commodores Sloat, Stockton, Shubrick and Biddle successively—Stockton having the good luck to do most of the work—had been equally successful in cooperation with John C. Frémont, "the Path-finder," and General Stephen W. Kearny, and the whole extent of territory from the forty-second parallel of latitude to the mouth of the Gulf of California was actually in the possession of the Americans. All the southern ports as far as Acapulco were blockaded. Colonel Doniphan had seized Chihuahua after a famous march; General Kearny had taken Santa Fé, and the whole country north of the Rio Grande and the Gila was in possession of the American Army. There was desultory fighting in different parts of Mexico for a short time, but even the most patriotic Mexican realized the utter hopelessness of the Mexican cause.

General Grant, who served with Taylor as



GENERAL SCOTT'S ENTRANCE INTO MEXICO.
From the original by Nebel.

GENERAL SCOTT

well as Scott in the Mexican War, said that "both of these generals deserve the commendations of their countrymen, and to live in the grateful memory of this people to the latest generation." He also approved heartily of most of the generalship displayed and declared that both Taylor and Scott "had such armies as are not often got together, and that a better army, man for man, probably never faced an enemy than the one commanded by General Taylor in the earlier engagements."¹ This is high praise, for officers and men, from one who knew whereof he affirmed, and to which it is a pleasure to call attention.

¹ Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant.